

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Japan's nuns speed-dating for Mr Right

DANIELLE DEMETRIOU
in Sanjo City, Niigata

GLANCING SHYLY through her fringe, Mine Mori confides in the man sitting opposite her that she loves cats, live music and rustling up a curry.

So far, so normal for a dating event – except this is no conventional gathering. For 32-year-old Miss Mori is a Buddhist nun in search of a perfect husband, her telltale black gown draped over her blouse and a red prayer book by her bag.

This was a scene that unfolded at Japan's first matchmaking event for nuns, where prospective male suitors were lined up and assessed as potential husbands.

Matchmaking events are booming in Japan, as the world's third largest economy grapples with a population crisis caused by a dwindling number of marriages and a shrinking birth rate.

Marriages have hit a record postwar low, with only 653,740 tying the knot last year, according to government figures, while average marrying ages have increased to 31 for men and 29 for women.

Rising childcare costs and economic instability combined with a decline in the number of young women have contributed to a declining fertility rate, which dropped last year to 1.4.

As a result, the government and companies are investing in initiatives such as match-making parties to encourage younger generations to marry and have babies.

All strands of society are being targeted – even nuns and monks, who according to Japanese Buddhist tradition, do not take celibacy vows but are encouraged to marry to ensure the survival of hereditary family temples.

The nun matchmaking event was the brainchild of Masataka Sekine, a monk

from Shibata in Niigata prefecture, north-west Japan, in collaboration with the Tokyo-based matchmaking company Two Ai Links. It follows their successes staging four monk matchmaking events which resulted in 31 couples and four marriages.

The events were aimed at helping the 75,000 temple families hit by the nation's demographic decline, according to Mr Sekine, who organises yoga and Italian organic cuisine at his temple to attract younger generations.

"People are not having children and it's difficult for those living in small cities and rural areas to meet other young

'Women are busy and don't want to settle right away'

people," he said. "It's very hard for temple owners in particular, because their temples will close if they cannot pass them on to their children.

"For nuns, it's extra difficult. When they marry, the husband takes the wife's name and not many men's families are happy about this."

The nun matchmaking event took place last week in the serene confines of the 17th century Sanjo Betsuin temple in Niigata's Sanjo City. Five women and seven men – among them a teacher, a factory worker, a banker and a social worker, aged from 27 to 47 – knelt in rows on the floor before an altar, while Buddhist sutras were chanted.

Participants then filed into another room, with tatami mat flooring and sliding paper screens that gave way to green temple garden views.

Here, the women – three nuns and two unordained

daughters of temple-owning families – knelt on cushions opposite their prospective dates. Each couple exchanged forms listing information such as hobbies, jobs, blood types and alcohol consumption, and talked for three minutes, before swapping partners.

A candle-making session followed, plus chatting over green tea and heart-shaped cookies, before participants cast their votes – resulting in three matched couples.

Among the successful was a nun who asked to be called Mine Mori, from Joetsu, Niigata. "I've been single for about 10 years. I don't have time to meet people, so I thought I'd give this a go.

"I suppose women today feel like they don't need to marry quickly. They have busy lives and don't want to settle down right away."

Describing her ideal husband, she added: "Someone who accepts my hobbies, likes cats and is kind." Sitting nearby was her date Yohji Mori, 37, a food delivery worker, who attended the event to find a wife with a serious vocation. Referring to low marriage rates, he added: "There's too much technology. People think real-life things, like getting married, are too much hard work."

Not so lucky – and perhaps more typical of the nationwide demographic – was a down-cast Ichiro Sato, a 40-year-old healthcare sales worker from Mitsuke, Niigata.

Perhaps only half-joking that he'd been looking for a wife "all my life", he said: "I came today as I was curious about meeting nuns and temple life. I find it hard to meet people. I don't think it's just me. About 60 per cent of my colleagues at work are also single. We're all working too hard.

"Women also seem to be happy single and are in no hurry to marry. It's not easy finding someone."



Buddhist nuns and priests take part in a matchmaking event in a temple in Niigata prefecture, Japan, exchanging personal information before casting votes

WORLD WATCH

ACTIVIST ARRESTED FOR REMOVING 'RACIST' FLAG

An activist climbed a flagpole outside the South Carolina state capitol yesterday and took down the Confederate battle flag, a day after President Barack Obama called it a symbol of racial oppression. The black woman and another man who had entered the wrought-iron fence around the flag were arrested. The flag, which is protected by state law, was raised a short time later.

Calls to remove the flag have been renewed since nine black churchgoers were killed in what police characterised as a racist attack at a Charleston, South Carolina church last week.

FIRST LIONS IN RWANDA SINCE 1994 GENOCIDE

Lions will return to Rwanda for the first time in more than two decades, officials have said.

Seven lions – two males and five females – are being transported from South Africa and will arrive by air in Rwanda tomorrow where they will be released after at least two weeks' quarantine into the eastern Akagera National Park.

Lions in Rwanda were wiped out during the 1994 genocide, which left an estimated 800,000 people dead.

HUNT IN WOODS FOR SECOND 'SHAWSHANK' FUGITIVE

Police who shot an escaped killer dead are hunting for the murderer who broke out of jail with him in a Shawshank Redemption-style escape in New York State as helicopters, search dogs and officers converged on a wooded area.

Police announced late on Friday that Richard Matt had been shot dead after being confronted by officers.

A second convicted killer, David Sweat, has not been spotted since he escaped with Matt from the Clinton Correctional Facility on June 6.

BAN ON 'CRUEL' FOIE GRAS ANGERS CITY'S CHEFS

Sao Paulo has banned the production and sales of foie gras – and chefs in Brazil's largest city are fuming.

Mayor Fernando Haddad signed a decree instituting the ban on grounds of cruelty to the geese that are fattened up to provide the liver to create the delicacy. Animal rights activists praised the new law, which carries a fine of up to \$1,900 for offenders, but Renato Carioni, the chef at a restaurant named Così, called it "ridiculous".

Clinton deploys 'couch-surfing' army

ROB CRILLY in New York

HILLARY CLINTON'S decision to locate her campaign headquarters in fashionable Brooklyn has given staffers and volunteers a major headache – how to find accommodation in one of the country's most inflated housing markets.

The campaign is running a spare room or couch-surfing service, pairing donors with its young army of workers who need a bed for the night.

The scheme is part necessity, part branding exercise for a wealthy politician frequently derided as out of touch with ordinary Americans.

One recent email put it bluntly: "Do you have a spare room – or just a spare couch! – where a new staffer could stay?"

You and I both know that finding a place to live in New York can take longer than an afternoon of apartment hunting.

"These folks will be working long days, so they really just need a place to sleep, and they'll be so grateful to be staying with someone who shares their beliefs and their goals."

Mrs Clinton's run for the White House is based over two floors of an office block in Brooklyn Heights.

Cynics suggested it was part of an attempt to gain a hipper image by picking New York's most fashionable borough.

In fact Brooklyn Heights lacks the hipster appeal of places such as Williamsburg, but even so its historic brownstones and views across the East River to Manhattan mean

rents are the highest in the borough. Finding a shoe-box sized apartment for less than \$2000 (£1270) is a challenge.

Lena Dunham, writer and star of *Girls*, recently spent almost \$5 million (£3 million) on a home nearby.

For those on a more modest budget, it means scouting locations deeper into Brooklyn, in neighbourhoods that have yet to get an artisan coffee shop – or apartment hopping using the Clinton Campaign's host-a-staffer service.

Jasmin Harris, 22, stayed with a middle aged couple in their Brooklyn Heights apartment for six weeks, until they needed their spare room.

"I don't know exactly where I'm going, but I'll be somewhere else tonight," she told

The New York Times. "I have my bags packed and am waiting for an email."

It is not the only money-saving element of the campaign. Workers have been told to take the bus wherever possible. That is in part to keep costs down during the primary campaign when donations are limited to \$2,700 per person, but also to show lessons have been learnt from the disastrous 2008 run when Mrs Clinton was seen as the high-spending Washington insider upended by Barack Obama's shoestring insurgents.

However, it leaves Mrs Clinton with a dilemma – whether or not to take her usual summer break in the Hamptons where a holiday home can cost \$200,000 a month.

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Personal

Text for the day

THE LORD is their strength, and he is the saving strength of his anointed. Save thy people, and bless thine inheritance: feed them also, and lift them up for ever.

Psalm 28:8-9

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